Press release

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Is there a doctor in the Met Office?

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Met Office secures funding for further work on 'Forecasting the Nation's Health'.

The Met Office has secured over one million pounds from the Government's 'Invest to Save' budget to develop its Weather and Health project in collaboration with the Department of Health. This follows a successful pilot project called Forecasting the Nation's Health over the winter. For more information, go to http://www.metoffice.com/health/nationhealth.html.

A multi-disciplinary team, including a GP and an epidemiologist from the University of Oxford, are working together with a team of weather forecasters and scientists from the Met Office.

The project works in two ways. A real-time database of current activity in NHS Direct, GP Co-ops and hospitals monitors current workload, particularly with regard to respiratory infections. Secondly, regular forecasts predict surges in emergency hospital admissions and the number of patients attending doctors' surgeries.

Users taking part in the winter pilot study have welcomed the service. Peter Lacey, from the NHS winter and emergency planning group in Leeds said: "The information has greatly increased our learning about another key element in the behaviour of the local system of health and social care at a critical time of the year. The forecasts have enabled Health Service Chief Executives to respond to emerging pressures in anticipation of the likely impact of changes in the weather, with the knowledge that such information comes from a reliable source."

Out of hours GP services have also found the service extremely useful. Lesley Irvine, General Manager of KernowDoc in Cornwall, said: "We have found the information to be remarkably accurate."

Her view was reinforced by Dr Alex Yeates, Medical Director of Meddoc in Kent: "We have been using the forecast to increase staffing over weekends when the workload has been predicted to be above average. On analysis of our telephone log data this has been extremely successful and has improved the service to patients in the Medway area."

Speaking on the day that the Treasury and MoD announced the funding, the Met Office's resident GP, Dr Bird said: "Initial feedback from the pilot study over the winter is very positive. The Met Office is the ideal organisation to run with this project, not just because of its ability to forecast the weather, but because it is one of very few organisations able to manipulate the large volumes of data involved 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The funding we have secured today will fund further well-focused research enabling us to spread the benefits of the pilot study across much more of the NHS next winter."

Notes:

1. The Met Office is an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Defence operating as a Trading Fund.

2. The Met Office's bid for funding from the 'Invest to Save' budget was backed by the Department of Health.

3. This winter's pilot study worked closely with NHS trusts and agencies in North London, Berkshire/Oxfordshire, Wolverhampton, Plymouth and Leeds.

4. The forecasts were available to NHS professionals nationwide using the NHS information network.

5. For more information on services for health, see http://www.metoffice.com/health/.

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